



# Caller ID: Privacy Still a Worry

## “Research Shows Caller ID Trial A Success.”

**This was the message trumpeted in a Telecom media release on 7 September.**

The trial referred to took place in the NSW town of Wauchope, where for a period of four months earlier this year, around 3000 residences and business premises had attached to their phones a Caller Identification (ID) unit which, on a small monitor, displays the caller's phone number to the person being called.

The positive tone of the release was generally echoed in the media coverage, which during the period of the trial focused on individuals in the town who thought the introduction of Caller ID was a Good Thing, thus reaffirming our propensity as a nation to jump enthusiastically at any new technology without necessarily considering its wider implications.

There is no doubt that there are positive aspects to this system: for example, by allowing people to screen their calls and choose whether or not to answer, it can reduce the potential for intrusive calls such as hard selling, as well as for hoax and obscene calls.

But there are some less positive aspects too. Since the introduction of the technology was first foreshadowed, *CU* has drawn attention to the possible downside of rushing headlong to adopt it (as has already happened in the US and is expected to happen in the UK later this year) - in particular, the potential the system holds for invasion of people's privacy and for the unwanted dissemination of personal information. For example, businesses could use this technology to collect the telephone numbers of potential customers. Silent numbers could be revealed.

## Concern for the Public Interest

In response to Telecom's media release, three major organisations representing consumer interests - the Consumers Telecommunications Network, the Communications Law Centre and the Australian Consumers Association - called for caution in the introduction of Caller ID, or Calling Number Display (CND) as it has been more commonly known.

In a joint media release, these organisations acknowledged that many people were able to understand and use the technology, but expressed concern that 'a significant portion of the trial population' had experienced difficulty in understanding the use and implications of CND services, particularly older people and people from non-English speaking backgrounds.

They were also concerned that Telecom's research in connection with the trial revealed that businesses showed

very little awareness of a Code of Practice developed to make sure that they would not misuse information they gained about individuals during the trial.

The organisations called on AUSTEL, the telecommunications regulator, not to allow the introduction of CND on a national basis unless it could satisfy itself that all members of the public understood the implications of the system and could be protected from its misuse.

Telecom acknowledged that there would always be 'people who do not want their number known for security or personal privacy reasons' and said that it was committed to examining CND thoroughly with the AUSTEL Privacy Committee on the question of privacy and on conditions which might apply to the system.

## The AUSTEL Committee

Given the role envisaged for AUSTEL in all this, it was perhaps fortuitous that on 23 September, not long after this exchange, AUSTEL announced that it had established its Privacy Advisory Committee following a request from the Minister for Communications.

AUSTEL Acting Chairman Neil Tuckwell said that the committee would advise the regulator on current and emerging privacy issues in telecommunications, particularly those which affect consumers of telecommunications services. The committee would identify privacy principles and advise on codes of conduct, Tuckwell said. Among the topics it would tackle as a priority was the possible introduction of Caller ID.

The Committee comprises representatives of: the Department of Communications and the Arts, Attorney General's, Telstra, Optus, Vodafone, ATUG, the TIO, the Privacy Commissioner, the Australian Direct Marketing Association and the Small Enterprise Telecommunications Centre.

There is also to be a representative nominated by the Minister for Consumer Affairs. The first person to fill this position is the Communications Law Centre's Holly Raiche. □

